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AUTHOR Harper, Nancy L.
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ABSTRACT

Noting that the formal split between instruction in written and oral modes of communication is a relatively recent one, this paper presents arguments against that split--at both the secondary school and the college level--and arguments for instruction in communication. The paper offers a historically based definition of communication, positing that the communicative act requires the communicator to: (1) categorize data relevant to a communication situation, (2) conceptualize that data, (3) symbolize it, (4) organize the symbols into some sort of order that will further the purposes and meanings of the communication situation, and (5) operationalize that data into a message. From this definition, the paper concludes that writing and speaking are modes of communication and that instruction in the two should be integrated. It then describes the rhetoric program at the University of Iowa, which for 30 years has offered such an integrated curriculum. In conclusion, the paper discusses the problems often encountered in student writing and explains how an integrated speaking/writing program can counter these problems. (FL)

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Rhetoric at the University of Iowa

Combining the Oral and Written Modes

by

Nancy L. Harper
Assistant Dean of Liberal Arts
and Associate Professor of Communication
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa 52242
(319) 353-6965

A paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Anaheim, California, 1981

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Abstract

This paper presents an argument against separate courses in writing and speaking at any educational level but especially at the college and university level. Based on an historically grounded definition of communication, the example of the Iowa Rhetoric Program, and an analysis of the functions of communication in contemporary society, the author argues for integrated "communication" instruction, that is, for courses combining instruction in both speaking and writing in the context of a focus on instrumental symbolic interaction.

NOTE: This paper is based on and contains verbatim passages from Nancy L. Harper, "Integrating Instruction in Speaking and Writing in the 'Basic Course,'" Iowa Journal of Speech Communication, 2 (Fall 1979), pp. 16-23.

Rhetoric at the University of Iowa

Combining the Oral and Written Modes

As the "back to basics" movement continues to dominate both secondary and higher education, those of us who teach communication must be ready to justify our field and methods and to offer new, but intellectually and educationally sound, alternatives to present practice. In this paper I argue that an essential, or basic, part of education at all levels is instruction in communication (rhetoric) as opposed to training or drill in speaking and/or writing.

The immediate impetus for this paper is the nation-wide concern for writing as a basic skill and the concurrent review and reevaluation of general education requirements going on at most American colleges and universities. In most of these institutions, such as Wiscorsin, Harvard, and Northwestern, one of the central concerns has been with the freshman writing course. Though federal legislation defines speech as a "basic," little attention has so far focused on oral communication. In Iowa, one of our state universities has apparently ignored speech, but has reaffirmed its commitment to freshman composition and instituted a writing competency test as a requirement for graduation. Another university has been considering its dual requirement of speaking and writing and discussing the possibility of integrating these into a single "communication skills" requirement. The University of Iowa has, for some thirty years, had an integrated "rhetoric" requirement, a course combining instruction in speaking and writing skills. In a recent review of Iowa's general education program, the question that sparked heated debate was not "shall we require freshman writing," but "shall we continue to require rhetoric, or shall we separate instruction in writing and speaking and require courses in one or in both?"

The quesions was, at least temporarily, resolved in favor of continuing the rhetoric program's combined, communication-oriented, writing and speaking course. However, the program is still being studied and debate, though less audible, continues. In this paper I argue that colleges and universities, as well as elementary and secondary schools, should require instruction in both writing and speaking and that this instruction should be integrated into courses in communication (or rhetoric). My argument is based on the history of communication and education and on the research about and the practice of communication in the contemporary world. More specifically, my argument grows out of an analysis of (1) the nature of communication, (2) the nature of Iowa's rhetoric program, and (3) the uses and functions of

communication.

The Nature of Communication

Communication is a unitary art. Throughout the 2500 years of recorded theory and research, this act has been explicitly or implicitly recognized in the work of theorists like Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, St. Augustine, John of Salisbury, Erasmus, Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, John Locke, Joseph Priestley, Richard Whately, George Campbell, I. A. Richards, Kenneth Burke, Walter Ong, and Harold Adams Innis.

From an extensive analysis of this body of theory and research, I have elsewhere argued that any communication (or rhetorical) act requires mastery of at least five generic skills <<1>>. First, the would-be communicator must categorize, that is, perceive, store, and classify data relevant to the situation (the subject, place, time, purpose, his or her abilities and position, and the potential receivers' capabilities, needs, and desires). Throughout the history of communication and rhetorical theory, categorization has most often been discussed in terms of selective perception, selective attention, and selective retention. Not only do people tend to see what they expect to see, but they attend to what is relevant to them and remember what seems useful to them. For communicators this imposes a dual problem. We must struggle to see what is "there" in spite of our own selectivity, and we must also try to see what is "there" in terms of the selectivity of our potential receivers <<2>>.

Second, after the data have been observed, they must be transformed into information, conceptualized. The question at this stage is, given the situation, which of these data will best further the communicants' purposes? Data, by themselves, are meaningless. They must be interpreted through some analytic process. In classical rhetorical theory, the analytic process was discussed in terms of the sources of argument common to all situations (such as "if it is possible to do the more difficult thing, it is possible to do the easier"), the generic modes of proof (ethos, logos, and pathos), and the topics special to particular situations and subjects (i.e., deliberative, forensic, and epideictic). We continue to use these basic notions, but in more modern communication theory we tend to discuss conceptualization in terms of evidence and the interpretation of evidence through arguments based on common experience, analogy to similar situations, the testimony of witnesses and experts, and statistical probability. Whatever our terminology, however, conceptualization clearly has to do with making data relevant and meaningful to people involved in arriving at more or less complex decisions about what is true, what is right, and what is the best course of action <<3>>.

Once information has been acquired and interpreted, it must be symbolized. We communicate not through things, but through symbolic representations of things. One of the more obvious problems any communicator faces is the selection of appropriate words, gestures, tones, literary forms, graphs, pictures, etc., to elicit the meanings he or she "has in mind."

Next, the communicator must organize these symbols into some order which will further the purposes and meanings. Something must come first. Something must be emphasized. Everything cannot be given equal weight or placement. Social expectations, situational factors, place limits on organizational decisions. As with symbolization, the options are extensive and, research indicates, the choices are often crucial. For instance, receivers tend to expect a statement of a problem prior to the argument for a solution. Receivers expect that the conclusion of a message will contain a statement of, or reiteration of, the source's central concern. When the source does not conform to these expectations, receivers are likely to reject the message (because the source is seen as having negative ethos (that is, as incompetent or insincere, or as a trickster), or to impute an order based on their own categorization processes (to "distort" the message) <<4>>.

Finally, the message must be operationalized it must be embodied in some physical form for delivery to others. Historically, the focus in theory and instruction has been on two modes of operationalization, writing and speaking. In the contemporary world, of course, we must add electronic modes, telegraph, television, radio, computers, etc., but these forms rely on written and use oral modes. Communication literature is rich in analyses of the differences and similarities between written and oral modes. One of the most common distinctions is the immediacy and therefore the superior persuasive power of oral communication as opposed to the reviewability and therefore superior long term effects of written communication <<5>>.

At least three salient observations emerge from this definitional paradigm. One, writing and speaking are modes of communication. They are not essentialy different, unrelated or even tangentially related activities. Instruction which proposes to teach writing differs from instruction which proposes to teach speaking in only one of the five generic areas. And even there, the difference is slight. Certain general principles, e.g., intelligibility, audience adaptation, ethos building, etc., apply to both modes <<6>>. Second, the choice of whether to operationalize a message in writing or in speech should be made consciously and can be made more effectively in terms of an understanding of the relative constraints of the two modes. Through studying the two together students learn how to make that

choice.

The third observation may well be the most important. Communication is an inherently interactive process. The central problem with all of the bad writing I have encountered in my teaching is that students forget, ignore, or don't know this basic truth. They look at writing as an impersonal, solitary activity. They "forget" the simple fact that writing is a communicative process, that someone is at "the other end," that they have an audience with special needs. Their papers are written "to whom it may concern" rather than to a person or people with particular characteristics and expectations. In an oral situation, to-whom-it-may-concern messages are immediately recognizable. The speaker cannot ignore his or her audience's failure to respond. In speaking exercises the student cannot fail to learn the interactive nature of communication. In integrated courses, the probability of transferring this learning to writing is significantly higher than it would be in separate speech and writing courses.

The Nature of the Iowa Rhetoric Program

The University of Iowa 30 years ago made a commitment to early instruction in communication (rhetoric), that is, to substantive rather than "stylistic" education. As I understand it, the purpose of the rhetoric program is to improve students' abilities in discovering, formulating, representing, ordering, and delivering their ideas to others. The name of the program, "rhetoric," explicitly ties it to the traditional five-part definition explained above <<7>>. I believe that this decision to root the program in the traditional humanistic or liberal arts approach to communication was an extremely wise one. With few exceptions, students who come to the Iowa colleges and universities have learned to write and speak. They may not do it "well," but they have learned to do it. More classrooom instruction is unlikely to be effective with those who have learned not to learn are unlikely to be harmed by more of the same instruction, but are also unlikely to appreciate or benefit greatly from it. What both need (excepting, of course, extreme cases of students who come from disadvantaged circumstances and require remedial work) is instruction in using the tools of writing and speaking for the purposes of communicating. Once a student knows how to use a hammer, whether or not he or she uses it expertly, the central question is where and when and why to use it.

As we all know, students do not become expert writers or speakers as a result of one course, or even as a result of four or five courses. Communication skills develop throughout our lives as we practice them. Having made this observation, however, elementary and secondary institutions continue to focus on skils training rather than on communication education. University faculties continue to recommend requiring a writing and, less often, a speaking course for all freshmen. In other words, the recommendations are for more of the same. I submit that what students need throughout their schooling and perhaps especially at the freshman level, is less of the same and more of something new. They need courses in how to use skills for purposes rather than "skill training." The Iowa program in rhetoric, as I understand it, provides this focus on use of skills. Mechanics are not ignored but are improved through motivated practice. In courses I have experienced which focus on either speech or writing (and I have taken and taught both) the tendency is to focus on the method, the skills, rather than the substance or the use. Especially at the college level, this technical focus tends to interact with students' natural resistance to required courses and results in the much despised "bonehead English." More importantly, it results in courses which at least slight, and often ignore, four of the five basic processes of communication, and whatever else writing may be (a mechanical skill, a grammatical skill, etc.) it is obviously and ultimately a mode of communication.

Uses and Functions of Communication

Like most of my colleagues, I strongly agree with the increased emphasis on written communication in university curricula. I am very disturbed, however, at the extent to which many institutions have overlooked oral communication. As a number of scholars have observed, Western civilization (if not all civilization) in the twentieth century is increasingly oral <<8>>. Business, education, and entertainment (the processes of negotiating and problem-solving, of lecturing and discussing, of listening to music and watching television, etc.) all rely heavily on oral communication. More generally, I believe that it is important to remember that, as one eighteenth century communication theorist put it, "speech makes history, writing simply records it."<<9>>.

I believe that more people "fail" in their chosen careers because of poor oral performance than because of poor writing. A business person who cannot talk effectively to his or her colleague, employees, and clients is at a far worse disadvantage than one who cannot write good memos. Research overwhelmingly indicates that power and influence are directly correlated to

oral communication skills <<10>>. For example, the "new" general education requirements at Harvard and elsewhere reflect the ideas of those individuals who were willing and able to speak persuasively in faculty and committee meetings. Furthermore, speaking skill was indirectly a prerequisite for membership on the committees that made the recommendations: it is through their oral skills that individuals come to be recognized and respected in complex organizations such as universities <<11>>.

In short, I believe that curriculum and review committees that focus on operational skills lose sight of the most central issue, that is, communication (rhetoric). Experience, research, and theory all point to the conceptual and practical superiority of a integrated communication requirement rather than a speaking and writing skills requirement.

I also believe that high school and university teachers must commit to placing increased emphasis upon communication (not just writing) in all courses. Oral performaces should be as much an object of every teacher's attention as written performances. For instance, students should give oral reports, discuss their own and others' written work, participate in relatively formal panels and symposia, etc., depending upon the kinds of oral and written performaces most relevant to the particular course. Such an aproach is no less relevant to, and no more difficult to implement in, a math course than an English course.

In making this argument for increased attention to oral communication I do not interd to imply that writen communication is of lesser importance. However, I do argue that both writing and speaking need to be taught in the context of a focus on instrumental communication and that this instruction needs to be reinforced throughout the student's educational career. It is not more concentrated writing instruction which will lead to better papers in advaced courses, but more rigorous attention to communication principles in both lower and upper level courses.

It is always frustrating to receive poorly written papers in junior, senior, or even graduate courses. But we all do, and it is easy to blame the elementary or secondary schools, or the freshman course for it. When I think about it, though, the poor papers I have received probably resuted from one of the following kinds of problems. First, the assignment and/or my standards were unclear to the student. As Wayne Booth points out, not knowing who the audience is or why the message is solicited accounts for much if not most of the poor writing college students do <<12>>. Second, the student does not know enough about the subject and/or is not motivated by the subject. Even the "best" writer canot put together a good paper when he or she lacks the necessary information or desire. Third, the student

has never had any rigorous instruction in communication and needs remedial work. Fourth, the student has not been required to write a paper since the freshman year and is simply rusty. A fifth possibility, though it seems very rare, may be that the student is incapable. As Aristotle says, "there are some people whom one cannot instruct."<<13>>.

My experience is that the first four causes are fairly common and all can be remedied by my actions, by clarifying the assignment, by counselling the student about reseach methods and reinforcing lessons learned in rhetoric (focusing, organizing, and so on). I find that with very rare exceptions students improve their writing in subsequent assignments. Thus, in a sense, more instruction solves the problem. But that instruction is recurring throughout the student's career and in the context of his or her "need to know" it is "communication" instruction, not "writing" instruction.

Conclusion

The formal split between instruction in written and oral modes of communicating is a relatively recent one. It no doubt came about due to the predominance of the elocutionary approach in the nineteenth century and the consequent division of the discipline of rhetoric into English and speech (or communication). When the most outspoken and visible teachers of rhetoric, such as Thomas Sheridan, turned their attention to delivery (oral operationalization through the body and voice), others rightly perceived this "new" rhetoric as inapplicable to written communication. The emphasis upon writing in isolation from other modes is, it seems to me, simply another manifestation of the much denigrated elocutionary movement. I believe that it is time for us to move forward by moving back to the integrated, holistic approach exemplified in the works of major teachers and theorists throughout the history of our discipline.

Footnotes

<<1>> For a more detailed history and analysis of this five-part definition, see Nancy L. Harper, Human Communication Theory: The History of a Paradigm (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden Book Co., forthcoming September 1979). One of the first to make explicit use of the full five-part paradigm as a definition was Cicero in 55 B.C.: De Oratore, translated by H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), I. xv. 64.

<<2>> See George Campbell, Philosophy of Rhetoric, edited by Lloyd F. Bitzer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), p. 95ff; Henry Home, Lord Kames, Elements of Criticism, 3rd edition (Edinburgh: AA. Kincaid and J. Bell, 1765), I. p. 142ff and David O. Sears and Jonathan L. Freedman, "Selective Exposure to Information: A Critical Review," Public Opinion Quarterly (Summer 1967), pp. 194-213.

<<3>> For the classical approach, see Aristotle, Rhetoric, translated by W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 1356a-1360b, 1392a6-1393a20; more recent approaches appear in textbooks such as Alan H. Monroe and Douglas Ehninger, Principles and Types of Speech, 6th ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman, 1967) and William L. Rivers, Writing: Craft and Art (Englewwood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975).

<<4>> See Joseph Priestley, A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism, edited by Vincent M. Bevilacqua and Richad Murphy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), pp. 34-277, and E. Thompson, "An Experimental Investigation of the Relative Effectiveness of Organization Structure in Oral Communications," Southern Speech Journal (Fall 1960), pp. 59-69.

<<5>> See Richard Whately, Elements of Rhetoric, edited by Douglas Ehninger (Carbondale: Souther Illinois Universty Press, 1963), pp. 368-376, and Carroll C. Arnold, "Oral Rhetoric, Rhetoric and Literature," Philosophy and Rhetoric, I (1968), pp. 191-210. Also, may of the oral/written distinctions have become central concepts in diffusion research see Everett M. Rogers and F. Floyd Shoemaker, Communication of Innovations (New York: The Free Press, 1971).

<<6>> As Richard Whately remarks in his "Introduction" to Elements of Rhetoric, p. 2, "most of the rules of speaking are, of course, equally applicable to writing."

<<7>> For a detailed description of the rhetoric program, see Cleo Martin, "The Rhetoric Program at the University of Iowa," Options in English: Fresman Composition (Modern Language Association, 1978).

<<8>> One of the best known of these is Marshall McLuhan. See, for instance, The Guterberg Galaxy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

<<9>> Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, edited by Harold Harding, 3 volumes (New York Garland Press, 1970), II. pp. 156-157.

<<10>> The pervasiveness and impact of oral modes have been well documented in the organizational communication literature of the last thirty years. See, for instance, Gerald M. Goldhaber, et al., "Organizational Communication: 1978," Human Communication, V (1978), pp. 76-96.

<<11>> See Rosabeth Moss Kator, Men and Women of the Corporation (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

<<12>> Wayne Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," College Composition and Communication (October 1963).

<<13>> Rhetoric, 1355a26.